

FACTS ABOUT RABIES VACCINATION FOR COMPANION ANIMALS

What is rabies?

Rabies is a rare, fatal infection of the brain. All mammals, including dogs, cats, and horses, can become infected with the rabies virus. In California, rabies occurs most often in wild animals such as bats, skunks, and foxes.

How do people get rabies?

Rabid animals shed the virus in their saliva. Humans and other animals can get rabies when the rabid animal bites them, or when saliva from a rabid animal gets into a break in their skin or mucous membranes (eyes, mouth, or nose).

Between 50,000 and 75,000 cases of human rabies are estimated to occur each year worldwide. Over 90% of these cases occur following exposure to a rabid dog. In the United States, rabies is rare among dogs because all states have laws that require dogs to be vaccinated against rabies. Nevertheless, approximately one-fifth of the human rabies deaths in the United States in the last 20 years occurred in people who had contact with a rabid dog in a foreign country where rabies vaccination is not widely practiced.

How do you prevent rabies in humans?

The risk of rabies for you and your pets can be significantly reduced by ensuring that dogs and cats are vaccinated for rabies and avoiding contact with wild animals. Persons who are bitten by any animal should immediately wash the wound with soap and water and consult with their health care provider.

Why is rabies vaccination of companion animals important?

In California, companion animals can be exposed to rabies when they encounter rabid wildlife, such as bats, skunks, or foxes. Vaccination not only protects your animal from disease and death due to rabies, but also provides an important second level of defense for you and your family.

Which companion animals should be vaccinated against rabies?

Dog owners must comply with California legal requirements for vaccination and licensure of all dogs over four months of age. Rabies vaccination is strongly encouraged for cats and horses that are outdoors and have potential contact with wild animals. Birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish cannot get rabies and these pets should not be vaccinated.

When should companion animals receive rabies vaccines?

- **Dogs:** The first rabies vaccine should be given after the dog is three months of age, with a second vaccination 12 months later. Dogs should receive a booster vaccination every three years thereafter.

- **Cats:** The first rabies vaccine should be given at three months of age, with a second vaccination 12 months later. Cats should receive a booster vaccine every year or every three years thereafter, depending on the type of vaccine used.
- **Horses:** Foals born to unvaccinated mares should be vaccinated at three to four months of age. Foals born to vaccinated mares should be vaccinated no earlier than six months of age, and again four to six weeks later. All vaccinated horses should receive a booster vaccine every year.

Consultation on vaccinations, including rabies vaccination, is part of the comprehensive health care for your pet provided by your veterinarian.

Are there risks in giving companion animals rabies vaccines?

Most companion animals do not experience any problems with rabies vaccinations. When reactions occur they are typically mild, short-lasting, and limited to swelling and discomfort at the vaccination site. Serious or life-threatening reactions to rabies vaccination are extremely rare and usually consist of an allergic reaction which can be treated with other medications. The protection from a devastating and deadly disease provided to your companion animal and your family from rabies vaccination of your pet far outweighs the low risk of a serious reaction to the rabies vaccine.

Where can you get more information on rabies vaccinations?

Your veterinarian is the best resource for discussing the health and care of your companion animals. More information is available at the [California Department of Public Health rabies webpage](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Rabies.aspx) (<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Rabies.aspx>) and the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention rabies webpage](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies) (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies>).

Updated July 2014